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Pre-Muhammadan Prophets in the Muslim Tradition and Piety

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Abstract

The belief in prophets before the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and in the divine books that Allah Almighty sent to humanity/books revealed to the humanity by Allah Almighty constitute two of the six/five articles of faith in Islam. The denial of any one of them would result in “apostasy” and excommunication. All textbooks on the Islamic creed as well as all other major theological sources acknowledge these beliefs which also comprise a primary component of the curriculum taught to Muslim children. However, the impact of these beliefs in Islamic thought and practice needs to be explored extensively.

This paper attempts to highlight the role played by the previous prophets in Islamic life, especially in its devotional practices, with the hope that this type of study will contribute to/aim of increasing the awareness of other religions and developing a more inclusive approach towards them in the spirit of mutual appreciation and respect. These are – undoubtedly – some of/among the more pertinent and noble objectives that concern the modern man and the society.

The paper begins by explaining the importance of belief in the previous prophets as set in the sources of Islam and then proceeds to highlight some aspects of its practical importance in Islamic thought and life. It concludes with a special focus on some Sufi concepts and practices that display their intrinsic connections to previous prophets.

Keywords: Prophets, *Tasawwuf*, spiritual subtleties, religious practices, witnessing (*mushāhadah*)

Introduction

God’s Prophets are among the major themes of the holy Qur’ān. Their stories, though not complete or chronologically arranged, are repeated throughout the holy Qur’ān with a clear purpose. After mentioning eighteen prophets, namely Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Zachariah, John, Jesus, Elias, Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah and Lot, and referring to many others without individually naming them, the holy Qur’ān goes on to state, “They are those whom God has guided, so follow their guidance. Say, ‘I ask not of you any reward for it. It is naught but a reminder for the

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worlds’.”¹ This instructive statement of God leaves no ambiguity regarding the centrality of prophets prior to Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and their importance in the life of the Muslims. In Sūrat Hūd 11: 120, the Holy Qur’ān also alludes to the idea of “making firm the heart of the Prophet (Muhammad, SAW)”, as one of the objectives for relating stories of other prophets. This does not preclude the instructions mentioned in al-An‘ām 6: 90, which states “follow their (the prophets’) guidance” and does not minimize the universal character of the Qur’ānic message, enshrined in the last part of the above verse “a reminder for the worlds.”

The holy Qur’ān declares “Islam” to be the quintessence of all the revelations sent to humanity through different prophets in different times in the history. In Sūrat al-Shūrā 42: 13, the holy Qur’ān states, “He has prescribed for you as religion that which He enjoined upon Noah, and that which We revealed unto thee, and that We enjoined upon Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, that you uphold religion and not become divided therein.”

Another recurring theme of the holy Qur’ān, is the impermanency of this world and its life, encouraging people to purify themselves and work for the Hereafter. At the end of chapter 87, named “The Most High,” for example Allah reminds people of this truth and says, “He indeed prospers who is purified, remembers the Name of his Lord and prays. Nay, but you prefer the life of this world, while the Hereafter is better and more enduring.”² The striking point here is what comes in the next two verses, in which Allah says, “Truly this is in the scriptures of old, the scriptures of Abraham and Moses.”³ This verse again is meaningful in the context of the prophets’ place in Islamic thought and practice.

This “fellowship” between Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his predecessors, which is at the heart of the Qur’ānic narratives,⁴ has been explained and expressed by the prophet (SAW) himself in a heart-touching saying. “I am the nearest of all the people to Jesus, the son of Mary, both in this world and in the Hereafter. The prophets are paternal brothers; their mothers are different, but their religion is one.”⁵ Even more vivid is the ḥadīth: “the relationship between me and the prophets who came before me is as the analogy of a man who built a beautiful house, but in which the space of one brick was left incomplete. The onlookers go around it, admiring the beauty of its construction, with the exception of the

¹ Al-An‘ām 6:90; See also 6:83-87 and al-Nisā’ 4:164. Translation of Qur’ānic verses are from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper One, 2015), unless otherwise mentioned.

²al-A‘lā 87:14-17.

³al-A‘lā 87:18-19.

⁴See al-Nisā’ 4:163-165.

⁵Narrated by Abū Hurayra and reported by al-Bukhārī; See Tayeb Chourieff, *Spiritual Teachings of the Prophet: Ḥadīth with commentaries by Saint and Sages of Islam*, translated by Edin Q. Lohja and edited by Fatima Jane Casewit (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), 213.

place of that brick. Now I have filled up the place of that brick; in me the building is completed, and in me the messengers are completed.”⁶

Moreover, we notice the holy Qur’ān takes the principle of “Pre-Muhammadan prophets as a source of inspiration and guidance” very seriously and that it institutionalizes this guidance in unambiguous terms. It makes the continual remembrance of this idea an essential constituent of the canonical prayer and attempts to entrench it in the Muslim consciousness. The sixth verse of the opening chapter of the holy Qur’ān, i.e., *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* reads: “Guide us upon the straight path” and the subsequent verse, the seventh one explains “the straight path” as “the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those who incurred wrath, nor of those who are astray.” The natural and immediate question to follow would be who are those on whom God had bestowed His favours? The Qur’ānic answer comes very clearly to state “Whosoever obeys God and the Messenger, they are with those whom God has blessed, the prophets, the truthful ones, the witnesses, and the righteous. What beautiful companions they are!”⁷ In chapter Maryam 19: 58, after narrating the miraculous story of Jesus and after a quick reference to some other prophets including Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Aaron, Ishmael and (Enoch) Idrīs, it has been unequivocally stated, “They are those whom God has blessed among the prophets of the progeny of Adam.”

From considering the fact that believing in all prophets is one of the pillars of faith,⁸ it follows that it ought to play – like other articles of faith– a crucial role in shaping the Muslim worldview, especially with regard to the aspect of relations with world faith communities. It cannot be otherwise. It is also worth noting that the holy Qur’ān states in al-Baqarah 2: 285, “The Messenger believes in what was sent down to him from his Lord, as do the believers. Each believes in God, His angels, His Books, and His messengers. ‘We make no distinction between any of His messengers.’ And they say, ‘We hear and obey. Thy forgiveness, our Lord! And unto Thee is the journey’s end.’” It is not only pre-Muhammadan prophets, rather pre-Qur’ānic scriptures that the Muslims have to believe in, in order to fulfill the necessary conditions for their membership of the Muslim community.

⁶See Muḥammad bin Ismā‘il al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣahīḥ*, Muḥammad Zuhayr bin Nāṣir (ed.) (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāt, 1422 AH), 4/186. Translation by Gai Eaton in *The Book of Hadith: Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad from the Mishkat al-Masabīh* (Bristol, England: The Book Foundation, 2008), 237.

⁷al-Nisā’ 4: 69, Although I have quoted the translation of the verse as it is, I must mention here that the rendering of the word *al-Shuhadā’* as witnesses does not seem to enjoy the support of the majority of classical exegetes. The comments provided by the editors try to shed some light on this concern. However, it needs a far deeper analysis.

⁸Sunni orthodoxy attested to what has been declared, as articles of faith in Ḥadīth Jibrīl. For an exhaustive and analytical study of the hadīth see Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1994), xxv-xxvi. The book – with its 358 pages without the index – is dedicated solely to the study of this single hadīth of the Prophet (SAW).

This must be the reason why the Prophet (SAW) took extra care in inculcating in the minds and hearts of the Muslims the importance of this fact.

It has been reported that when Gabriel was sitting with the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), he heard a sound from above, so he raised his head and then said, “This is a pathway from the Heaven that opened today, never before it was opened. An angel descended from that.” Then he said “this angel descended on earth, never before, and greeted and said, you have been granted two lights, no prophet before you has been given them; the first chapter of the holy Qur’ān and the last verses of the second chapter of the holy Qur’ān.”⁹ According to another report, the Prophet (SAW) said, “Whoever recites the last two verses of the chapter on ‘The Cow’ that would be sufficient for him.”¹⁰

The importance of pre-Muhammadan prophets in Islamic faith and practice is brought to the forefront of the Muslim consciousness through the most important act of worship, the Ṣalāt. One of its essential constituents is the recitation of Sūrat al-Fātiḥa.¹¹ In this sūra, the Muslims have been taught to supplicate to God seeking guidance to the straight path and they do it a minimum of 17 times. If we add the supererogatory prayers, the number is much higher. This is also the Sūra, which is repeated by the Muslims on many social occasions to invoke blessings. The auspicious nature and power of this Sūra is considered to be so immense that no meaningful act could be initiated without its recitation. Sufis have a special affinity with it. Following the examples of the Prophet (SAW) and the companions, they recite this Sūra as an antidote and a source of blessing for all purposes, especially for healing.¹² Short as it is, each verse of it conveys ideas and concepts, when taken together, summarize the principles and foundations of the worldview of Islam. Supplicating for the guidance of the previous prophets occurs here within this highly important context.

Another depiction of the Qur’ānic recognition of the place of the previous prophets in Islam, of asserting “the principle of prophetic commonwealth” and confirming the idea of the essential unity of all prophetic messages occurs in Āl ‘Imrān 3: 81. This verse expresses one of the key concepts of the holy Qur’ān, known as “prophetic covenant.”¹³ It reads “And [remember] when God made the covenant of the prophets: “By that which I have given

⁹Muslim bin Ḥajjāj, *al-Musnad al-Ṣahīḥ*, Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (ed.) (Beirut: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 1/554.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹This sūra is not only the first sūra of the Qur’ān; it is also the one, which has been introduced as the Mother of the Book and enjoys a unique place in Muslim piety and spirituality.

¹²See Muslim bin Ḥajjāj, *al-Musnad al-Ṣahīḥ*, 4/1727 for an incident which involved the Companions of the Prophet (SAW) reciting Sūrat al-Fātiḥa as an antidote and receiving the Prophet’s approval for their action.

¹³This is different from the verse of the Qur’ān identified in the Islamic tradition as the *Āyat al-Mīhāq* “the verse of the Covenant” which occurs in al-A’rāf 7:176. The Qur’ān also talks about a third category of a covenant that is the “covenant of the book”. See al-A’rāf 7:169.

you of a Book and Wisdom, should a messenger then come to you confirming that which is with you, you shall surely believe in him and you shall help him." He said, "Do you agree and take on My burden on these conditions?" They said, "We agree." He said, "Bear witness, for I am with you among those who bear witness." Then the holy Qur'ān comments as follows, "Then whosoever turn away after that, they are the iniquitous. Do they seek other than God's religion, while whosoever is in the heavens and on the earth submits to Him, willingly or unwillingly, and unto Him they will be returned? Say, "We believe in God and what has been sent down upon us, and in what was sent down upon Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what Moses, Jesus, and the prophets were given from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and unto Him we submit."¹⁴ This verse further acknowledges the essential unity of all the religions sent by God, through chosen messengers with revealed scriptures. It does, however, need to be stated that, far from making any distinction among the prophets of God by virtue of being prophets, there is a recognition of some of them enjoying a place of particular reverence. One such group of prophets is known as *Ulū al-'Azm* (the resolute ones)¹⁵ and is represented by Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them).

2. Prophets and Islamic Rituals

The very special status of Prophet Ibrāhīm is clearly established in the holy Qur'ān. There are seven verses in the holy Qur'ān, which refer to *Millat Ibrāhīm* or (Religion of Abraham) specifically as synonymous to Islam or the religion of Prophet Muhammad (SAW).¹⁶ Those who know the basics of Islam are aware of the relationship of *Hajj* (the annual Muslim Pilgrimage) to Prophet Abraham. According to the holy Qur'ān, it is Abraham and his son Ishmael who were given the task of erecting the house of God for the pilgrims so that they could commemorate the collective acts of Prophet Abraham's family in this case (Hagar and Ishmael).

Even the obligatory fasting during the month of Ramadān (the ninth month of the Muslim calendar) is a worship that is strongly linked to the teachings of pre-Muhammadan prophetics. The holy Qur'ān says "O believers! Fasting has been made compulsory upon you the way it had been made compulsory upon those who were before you..."¹⁷ indicating that all the previous prophets enjoined fasting upon their nations and peoples.

Having recognized the centrality of pre-Muhammadan prophets in Islam, it would be interesting to see how its importance is reflected in the Muslim thought and practice, particularly in the Muslim piety.

¹⁴Āl 'Imrān 3:82-84.

¹⁵The Qur'ān al-Ahqāf 46:35. See the commentary of this verse in *The Study Qur'ān*, 1234.

¹⁶See the Qur'ān al-Baqarah 2:130; 2:135; Āl 'Imrān 3:95; al-Nisā; 4:125; al-An'ām 6:161; al-Nahl 16:123; al-Hajj 22:78.

¹⁷al-Baqarah 2:183.

3. Previous Prophets and Prophet Muhammad (SAW)

Since Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is the channel through whom the holy Qur'ān was received while being its essential interpreter through his words and deeds, Almighty Allah deemed it appropriate that he also be the best model for all believers.¹⁸ Naturally then, his life would become the focus of his followers in all aspects. It is his example they seek and strive to emulate. It is important then, to see how the previous prophets featured in the Prophet's (SAW) personal life.

It is clear from the ḥadīth tradition that during the Meccan period, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) had met all prophets when he made his night journey to Jerusalem and led them in prayers there. He had conversation with some of them during the onward Mi'rāj journey the same night. According to a ḥadīth, he met Prophet Moses several times during his heavenly while several reports confirm that he also met Abraham, Jesus, Adam, Joseph and a few Prophets as well.¹⁹

When he migrated to Medina, he saw the Jews fasting on a day that falls in the Muslim calendar on the 10th of Muḥarram. On inquiring about it, he was told that this was the day in which God saved Moses from Pharaoh, and that they fasted on that day to commemorate this event and as a gesture of thanksgiving to God. The immediate reply from the Prophet (SAW) was “we are more worthy of Moses than you” and he declared the significance of that day by fasting on that day. From that day onwards, the majority of the Muslims throughout the world fast on this day, and continue to do so with lot of zeal and fervour.

The Prophet (SAW) also taught the Muslims to remember Abraham and his family whenever they bless and salute him (Prophet Muhammad [SAW]), especially in the ritual prayer. It has been reported that when the Qur'ānic verse, “God and His angels bless the Prophet (SAW) – so, you who believe, bless him too and give him greetings of peace,”²⁰ was revealed, the companions told the prophet, O messenger of God! we know how to send the greetings of peace to you, but teach us how to bless you; the Prophet answered, “Say, Oh God, Bless Muhammad and his family the way you blessed Abraham and his family.”²¹ According to some schools of Islamic law, such as the Shafī'i School, the ritual prayer is considered invalid if the salutation is not recited. The preferred formula the prophet taught

¹⁸See the Qur'ān al-Aḥzāb 33:21, where it says, “Indeed, you have in the Messenger of God a beautiful example for those who hope for God and the Last Day, and remember God much.”

¹⁹There are different versions of this ḥadīth of al-Mi'rāj. They all agree on the point of meeting with all other prophets in the mosque and few selected ones in the heavens. See for instance one of the most authentic versions in Muḥammad bin Ismā'il al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣahīh*, 5/52.

²⁰al-Aḥzāb 33:56.

²¹Muḥammad bin Ismā'il al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣahīh*, 4/146.

the Muslims, as we can observe, highlights Abraham and his family. Hence, this formula is famously known as *al-Ṣalāt al-Ibrāhīmiyya*.²²

In addition to invoking a previous prophet in his religious practices, the Prophet (SAW) authorizes the practice of invoking their name as intermediaries in supplication to God.²³ Furthermore, there are many traditions of the prophet in which Prophet Muhammad (SAW) gives physical descriptions of some of the prophets before him.²⁴ And still in some other traditions he introduces some practices of other prophets as examples to be emulated. The fasting practice of Prophet David offers one such example. It has been reported that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said, “The best way of fasting is that of David. He used to fast one day and have breakfast (not fast) the other.”²⁵

4. Pre-Muhammadan Prophets in the Islamic Tradition

Islamic thought and practice – in their totality – can be safely classified in three areas on the basis of the contents of Hadith Gabriel. This *ḥadīth* is the only tradition, the content of which had been characterized by the Prophet as representing the essence of what the Muslims are to take as their religion. The content of this *ḥadīth* is a dialogue between Angel Gabriel (disguised as a stranger) and the Prophet (SAW), in the company of his companions. Gabriel’s identity was not disclosed to them until he was gone. The Prophet asked ‘Umar who happened to be among those present at that time if he had any clue about the identity of the person who had just left. Umar replied in the negative. The prophet said, “That was Gabriel, he came to teach you your religion.” This statement of the prophet is what makes this *ḥadīth* so unique and foundational in defining Islam. In this *ḥadīth*, religion has been clearly explained through three essential dimensions, namely *Īmān*, *Islām* and *Ihsān*. To recognize the importance of the previous prophets as reflected in Islam, we need to consider these three dimensions, which are usually taken to correspond to the disciplines of Theology, Jurisprudence and Sufism respectively.

4.1. Theological Tradition

Theology is the science of creed. It deals with issues that are related to faith or fall within its ambit. That is the area of *Īmān*, which means believing or having faith. As such, it pertains to the area of creed, or *‘aqīda* around which the Muslim scholastic and theological deliberations revolve. At the heart of the Muslim creed, we find previous prophets and their scriptures. The connection with the previous prophets is unequivocally established by making belief in them and their scriptures an article of faith. According to this faith, Islam is not an altogether independent religion. All previous religions established

²²For its full version, al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu’jam al-Awsat*, Ṭāriq Muḥammad and ‘Abd al-Mohṣin (ed.) (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥaramayn, n.d.), 4/378.

²³See for instance al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu’jam al-Kabīr*, Hamdī bin ‘Abd al-Majīd (ed.) (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyyah, 1994), 24/351.

²⁴See for instance Muslim bin Ḥajjāj, *al-Musnad al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 1/151.

²⁵See Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (ed.) (Cairo: Dār Ihyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyyah, n.d.), 1/546.

through prophets are called Islam and their prophets Muslims. Islam, understood as the religion brought by Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is the continuation of the traditions of the previous prophets and their culmination. Denial to this connection – by either denying a prophet or denying a book – amounts to infidelity and exposes the person to ex-communication.

The Islamic worldview stands firmly on the principle of God's care for the universe and on the notion of revelation as guidance from Him to humankind, communicated to them through His messengers and prophets.²⁶ It is thus clear that faith in the previous messengers and their scriptures constitutes one of the pillars of Islam's global dimension and demonstrates the pluralistic nature of the Muslim theology, in the sense that it looks at the religious other as part of its own-self, which makes coexistence one of the natural outcomes of this theology. Even in case of deviation of the followers of other religions from the teachings and examples of their prophets and despite the Qur'ānic stand on the nature of the Jewish and the Christian scriptures, Islamic theology does not exclude them from the universal religious commonwealth.²⁷ On contrary, it gives them a special place under the special category of "People of the Book" (*Ahl al-Kitāb*), whilst integrating their prophets into its basic belief system. Even to say "their prophets" may not be accurate. They are Muslim prophets and denial of any one of them or their scripture(s) amounts to apostasy. This is the stand of the Muslim theology. Even the basic Muslim creed of "finality of Prophet Muhammad (SAW)" is, but a clear recognition of the chain of prophets and acknowledgment of the fact of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) being the last link of that chain. The *hadīth*, which we quoted earlier about the parable of a house, is ample evidence in this regard.

4.2. Juristic Tradition

Coming to the Islamic legal system known as *Shari'ah*, we have, from the very beginning of the development of Muslim legal thought, serious debates over the legal status of the sacred scriptures predating the holy Qur'ān and *Sunna*. The deliberations of the Muslim jurists in this regard gave birth to the saying that has almost become a legal maxim among the Muslim jurists, i.e. *Shar' man qablana shar' lana* which means "the rulings of the previous nations are ruling for us too". The great Shafi'i jurist Jamāl al-Dīn al-Isnawī (d. 772/1370) says that the majority of the jurists including Imam Shafī'i himself have lent their support to this maxim and countered those who have opposed it."²⁸ As for the practical side of the *shari'ah*, we have seen how prayer, fasting and pilgrimage relate to pre-Muhammadan prophets and their respective religions. It is interesting to note that the compulsory five times prayer in Islam was originally prescribed fifty times a day; it was

²⁶See for example the Qur'ān al-Baqarah 2: 213.

²⁷See the Qur'ānic declaration in al-Fath 48: 13-15 and al-Mā'idah 5:44.

²⁸See Jamāl al-Dīn al-Isnawī, *Nihāyat al-Sūl Sharḥ Minhāj al-Wuṣūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1999), 256.

reduced to five due to the involvement of Moses (SAW).²⁹ It is not only the previous prophets, rather the virtuous practices of their followers as well that has been considered a legitimate practice for the Muslims. In a ḥadīth recorded by Tirmidhī, the Prophet (SAW) says, “Perform night prayers; it is the practice of pious people before you.”³⁰

4.3. Exegetical Tradition

The Muslim exegetes too have shown some interest in the stories of the previous prophets as a necessary requisite for the accomplishment of their responsibilities as exegetes of the holy Qur’ān. A genre of exegetical tradition known as *Isrā’īliyyāt* is very popular in the area of *Tafsīr* studies. Despite different attitudes towards employing materials from *Isrā’īliyyāt*, exegetes continue to utilize them. It becomes difficult to have a detailed picture of the stories of the previous prophets if this material is ignored. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) authorized reporting on the authority of the Children of Israel (Banū Israel), technically meaning the Jews and the Christians. He said “proclaim even a single verse from me. And report on the authority of Banū Israel, (there is) no harm (in it).”³¹ No wonder, these materials were among the main sources for Qur’ānic exegesis in the age of the *Tābi‘ūn* (the followers).³²

Some sound reports from Prophet Muhammad (SAW) stand in support of using Judeo-Christian materials. Wahb bin Munabbih and Ka‘b al-Aḥbār are among the most famous earlier Muslims who are known for their interest in reporting these materials. We have seen above how the Prophet (SAW) used to pray to Allah, using previous prophet as intermediaries. In all ḥadīth collections, we come across many reports containing some interesting comments about them. In the context of Moses and al-Khiḍr, which chapter 18 of the holy Qur’ān relates, it is reported that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said “if not for Moses’ haste we would have learnt more about the story.” The way the Prophetic traditions are talking about the previous prophets compel us to believe that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was well aware of them.³³

However, the living manifestations of the pre-Muhammadan prophets in Islamic piety and practice appear in a more mature and profound manner in the *Ihsān* dimension of Islam

²⁹See Muḥammad bin Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣahīh*, 1/78. Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, 4/207.

³⁰Abū ‘Isā Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, Ahmad Shākir and Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (ed.) (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1975), 5/553.

³¹Muḥammad bin Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣahīh*, 4/170.

³²For a detailed discussion on the genre of *Isrā’īliyyāt* (Reports from Jewish and Christian source) and its proliferation in the early centuries of Islam see Muḥammad bin Muḥammad Abū Shuhbah, *al-Isrā’īliyyāt wa al-Mawdū‘āt fī Kutub al-Tafsīr* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Sunnah, 1408 AH).

³³See Muḥammad bin Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣahīh*, 3/120 (ḥadīth no. 2411), 4/160 (ḥadīth no. 3417), 2/90 (ḥadīth no. 1339), 4/167 (ḥadīth no. 3444); Also see Muslim bin Ḥajjāj, *al-Musnad al-Ṣahīh*, 1/65 (ḥadīth no. 2366), 4/1838 (ḥadīth no. 2368), 4/1843 (ḥadīth no. 2373); and Abū ‘Isā al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 5/373 (ḥadīth no. 3245), 5/588 (ḥadīth no. 3617).

known as *Taṣawwuf* or Sufism. Here we find many of these prophets at the heart of the Sufi experience. I will try to explain this through some key Sufi practices in the lines to follow.

4.4. The Sufi Tradition

As early as the third century of Islam, al-Junayd (d. 297/910), known as “Master of the sect” (*Sayyid al-Tā’ifa*), said:

Sufism is founded on eight qualities exemplified in eight Apostles: the generosity of Abraham, who sacrificed his son; the acquiescence of Ishmael, who submitted to the command of God and gave up his dear life; the patience of Job, who patiently endured the affliction of worms and the jealousy of the Merciful; the symbolism of Zacharias, to whom God said, *Thou shalt not speak unto men for three days save by signs* (Kor. iii, 36), and again to the same effect, *When he called upon his Lord with a secret invocation* (Kor. xix, 2); the strangerhood of John, who was a stranger in his own country and an alien to his own kin amongst whom he lived; the pilgrimhood of Jesus, who was so detached therein from worldly things that he kept only a cup and a comb – the cup he threw away when he saw a man drinking water in the palms of his hands, and the comb likewise when he saw another man using his fingers instead of a toothpick; the wearing of wool by Moses, whose garment was woolen; and the poverty of Muhammad, to whom God Almighty sent the key of all the treasures that are upon the face of the earth, saying : Lay no trouble on thyself, but procure every luxury by means of these treasures; and he answered : ‘O Lord, I desire them not; keep me one day full-fed and one day hungry.³⁴

Here we see some fundamental Sufi concepts being founded on and explained through different prophets of the past. It is not that a particular prophet was known for this or that virtue to the exclusion of others. Rather it is something that this particular prophet was characterized with. It has usually been observed that Sufis have had a positive interaction with followers of other faiths. Their biographies are replete with stories of mutual visits and friendship. In this regard, sub-continent Sufism constitutes an exceptional example.³⁵

There are many examples which depict the profound presence of other prophets’ influences in Sufi thought and practice. Students of *tasawwuf* know how Ibn ‘Arabī constructed his rich spiritual understanding of the universe through invoking the special character traits of the Qur’ānic prophets. The idea of “prophetic inheritance” which, Ibn ‘Arabī discusses in detail in his *magnum opus* *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya*—an idea that introduces pre-Muhammadan prophets as integral to the path of spiritual ascent, is another aspect of that display.

³⁴ Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī, *The Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, translated by Reynold A. Nicholson (Brill: Leyden, 1911), 39-40. Al-Hujwīrī – after quoting this – comments by saying “These are very excellent principles of conduct.”

³⁵ See for instance Muhammad Modassir Ali, “Spiritual Values and World Peace: The Nizām al-Din Awliya’ Model,” in *Hawliyah al-Jamiah al-Islamiyyah al-Alamiyyah* (2008), 15/23-40.

Space will not allow me discussing both these two examples. I would rather confine myself to one of them, which is the concept of Subtleties (*laṭā’if*), which is famously connected to the Sufi practice of Remembrance of God *dhikr* and to the concept of “inheritance of the prophets”.

4.4.1. Idea of Subtleties (Laṭā’if) and the Previous Prophets

Laṭā’if is an important concept in connection with the stages of spiritual elevation in the Sufi practice. One of the most important practices of the Sufi path is *dhikr*, which constitutes the core of the path of the wayfarer in *tasawwuf*. Hundreds of books and treatises have been written by Sufis throughout the ages expounding this issue. This central practice of *tasawwuf*, realizes itself in the complete annihilation of the self of the recollecter (*mudhakkir*). This is what al-Kalābādhī implied when he began his chapter on *dhikr* by saying “real recollection consists in forgetting all, but the one recollected.”³⁶ When this practice progresses and begins yielding its results, the role of previous prophets becomes clear.

I will take the Naqshbandī³⁷ model to make this point clear through their concept of *laṭā’if*. Naqshbandīs are known for what is called *al-dhikr al-khaftī*, the silent remembrance of God or the *dhikr* of the heart (*al-dhikr al-qalbī*). This is also known as the secret remembrance or *al-dhikr al-sirrī*. From the time of Khawāja Bahā’ al-Dīn Naqshband (d. 1318-1389), the eponym of the order,³⁸ this method of *dhikr* has been at the heart of the Naqshbandī practice. Although many modern Naqshbandīs perform vocal *dhikr*, especially in the *dhikr* circles of Shaykh Nāzim (d. 2014) and his disciples, the silent form of *dhikr* continues to characterize the order. Some branches of Naqshbandīs³⁹ strictly hold fast to this practice exclusively even today. The rigorous following of silent *dhikr* continues to be acknowledged as the unique characteristic of the order (*tariqa*). Even those who began to practice vocal *dhikr* do not deny the centrality of the silent one to the order.

³⁶Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī, *al-Ta ‘arruf li Madhab ahl al-Taṣawwuf*, translated by A. J. Arberry by the title *The Doctrine of the Sufis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 95.

³⁷On Naqshbandiyya order see, K. A. Nizami, “The Naqshabandiyya Order,” in Seyyed Hossein Nasr (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Islamic Spirituality*, 2: 162-196.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Al-Naqshbandiyya al-Kurdīyya in Egypt, an offshoot of the Khālidīyya is worth mentioning here. Its grand Shaykh Muḥammad Amīn al-Kurdī (1332/1914) discusses the practice of *dhikr* in the order in detail, but interestingly does not mention the vocal form of *dhikr* at all. See his *al-Mawāhib al-Sarmadiyya fī Manāqib al-Sādah al-Naqshbandiyya* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sa‘ādah, 1329), 313-323.

According to the description of the prominent Egyptian Naqshbandī Shaykh Muḥammad Amīn al-Kurdī, (d. 1332/1914)⁴⁰ the silent *dhikr* can be performed with two formulas. One is the “Word of Majesty” (*Lafz al-Jalālah – Allāh*), also known as “the name of the essence of God.” The other is the sentence that forms the first article of faith, which consists of two parts: Negation (*lā ilāha*) and assertion (*illa Allāh*).⁴¹

The repetition of this practice, which is minimally supposed to be once on a daily basis, will result in the ascendance of the heart towards its perfection, after passing through different levels and states. The development of this transformation is explained by classifying the progress into five levels called “five subtleties” (*al-Laṭā’if al-Khams*). Arberry calls them “psychic organs.” Here, I will quote Arberry, whose translation of these five subtleties, as presented by al-Kurdī is brief and accurate.

The *qalb* (heart) is two fingers' breadth below the left nipple towards the side; it is shaped like a pine-cone. It is under the foot (sc. religious control) of Adam; its light is yellow.

The *rūh* (spirit) is two fingers' breadth below the right nipple towards the breast. It is under the foot of Noah and Abraham; its light is red.

The *sirr* (inmost conscience) is two fingers breadth above the left nipple towards the breast. It is under the foot of Moses; its light is white.

The *khafī* (hidden depth) is two fingers' breadth above the right nipple towards the breast. It is beneath the foot of Jesus; its light is black.

The *akhfā* (most hidden depth) is in the middle of the breast. It is under the foot of Muhammad (SAW); its light is green.⁴²

This is a very important piece of information that comes from the experiential discovery of the Sufis. It is here that one encounters with some of the other prophets take place, namely Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (SAW). The key is sincerity and continuity. Being at the foot of a prophet means inheriting some spiritual qualities of that particular prophet. This is why when Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1340) narrated the story of Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī (d. 234/848) when he brought to life a dead ant, he commented by saying “it is the spirit of Jesus at work.”⁴³ These subtleties are filled with

⁴⁰ See Muḥammad Amīn al-Kurdī, *al-Mawāhib al-Sarmadiyya fī Manāqib al-Sādah al-Naqshbandiyya*. Also A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London, Boston, Sydney: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), 129-133.

⁴¹ For the details of the techniques and manners (*ādāb*) of this practice, see A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*, 130-131.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 131-132.

⁴³ See *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, 9-volume edition (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2007), chapter 36 of *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya* for a detailed analysis of the nature of spiritual stations and their connections to previous prophets.

experiences of the higher realms and make those who have experienced them say what Imam al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) said, “there has been what has been that which I cannot utter, think good of it and do not ask about the matter.”⁴⁴

These stages of subtleties seem to contain visions and experimental wisdom which have no ends, as long as the practitioner is living that experience. Indicating this fact could be behind the Naqshbandī prayer, “O God! make us understand your mysteries, clothe us with Your lights, immerse us in the sea of the subtleties, and inundate us with gifts of gnosis.”⁴⁵ A semantical look at this short verse of prayer reveals the gnostic dimension of the experience of subtleties.⁴⁶ Just compare this prayer with the beginning statement of *Mystical Theology*, an important classical text on Mysticism written by a sixth century mystic Dionysius the Areopagite, which reads as follow.

Supernal triad, Deity above all essence, knowledge and goodness; Guide of Christians to Divine wisdom; direct our path to the ultimate summit of thy mystical Lore, most incomprehensible, most luminous, and most exalted where the pure, absolute, and immutable mysteries of theology are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their Darkness, and surcharging our blinded intellects with the utterly impalpable and invisible fairness of glories surpassing all beauty.⁴⁷

Because of the ineffability that characterizes this experience, it will always be impossible to make it intelligible. It is a state of a passive reception of what is being unveiled, and a state of tasting the experimental knowledge of higher realms of being, while being in a state of complete annihilation. A state where opposites meet as outsiders perceive them. You will find the same description in all Naqshbandī sources.⁴⁸

⁴⁴Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqiz min al-Dalāl*, ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd (ed.) (Cairo: Dār al-kutub al-ḥadīthah, n.d.), 179.

⁴⁵This is part of the famous Naqshbandī liturgical text, written by the eponymous founder of the Naqshbandiyya order Shāh Bahā’ al-Dīn, and recited by Naqshbandī devotees throughout the world. The text is in Arabic and any bookshop – large or small – even if it’s a stationery shop in Turkey will have it. Its best edition to the best of my knowledge is the one published in Cairo by Matba‘at al-Sa‘ādah in 1968 edited with comments by Najm al-Dīn al-Kurdī under the title *Al-Ijābah al-Rabbāniyya*. The edition I have used here is the one published by Cairo: Dār al-Muṣṭafā, 1424/2003. See page 36 for this prayer.

⁴⁶Overlaps between this and different mystical prayers are notable. Although mysticism is different from *Tasawwuf*, none can deny the existence of some overlap between both.

⁴⁷See for the full text in English, with a brief introduction, F. C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 211-217.

⁴⁸See for example Muḥammad Muṣṭafā bin ‘Abd Allāh al-Qazānī, *Tadhyīl al-Rashahāt* on the margin of ‘Alī bin Ḥusayn al-Wā’iẓ al-Kāshifī al-Harawī’s *Rashahāt ‘Ayn al-Hayāt* (Makka: al-Maṭba‘at al-Mīriyya, 1300 AH).

Explaining what is meant by the phrase “at the foot of” Shaykh Najm al-Dīn al-Kurdī (d. 1982), the son of Muhammad Amīn al-Kurdī and his successor writes:

what is meant by “foot” is the way and method. Whoever reaches one of these subtleties according to the description given, he will be on the likeness of the prophet under whose foot is that subtlety. The Divine gift and the light that reaches the heart of those qualified from the Divine presence are of various types, known to the people of taste. Each prophet is overwhelmed by one of those types. The final prophet (SAW) is the cluster of all those types together. Allah’s folks from the followers of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) have different preparations that match what is with some prophets. It will be that particular prophet who will be pouring on the heart of the folk what he became entitled to. Subsequently the character traits of that prophet will be overwhelming this folk and he will be governed by that until he ascends to the next stage.⁴⁹

What is important for us here is not the details of what these subtleties mean. Rather the connection of Sufi spiritual practices to various prophets. If we contemplate over the implication of this idea we will find that, the concept of “one family” regarding the relationship between prophets, with all its ramifications, is present vividly in the Muslim piety, and exceptionally manifest in Sufi practice.

These subtleties, which involve different prophets, are related to “witnessing” (*mushāhada*) or unveiling (*kashf*). The Sufi wayfarer, throughout his journey towards the state of proximity (*qurb*), is supposed to be gradually advancing stage by stage and being gifted with visions, witnessing, and unveiling, in accordance with his individual spiritual capacity. What is meant is the witnessing of the Divine theophanies in the heart.⁵⁰ This is what ‘Alī al-Hajwīrī (d.465/1073) says when he differentiated between witnessing with the physical eye and witnessing with the inner eye or the eye of the *sirr* (*‘ain al-sirr*).⁵¹ However, the aspirant cannot be introduced to this unveiling or witnessing or vision save through an intermediary. That intermediary is that prophet whose nature is the most appropriate for the state of the aspirant. As he proceeds, he will be passing through different prophets according to the stages until he reaches a stage where he receives from the final prophet (SAW). This is how we see the previous prophets at the heart of the process of spiritual realization.

⁴⁹Najm al-Dīn al-Kurdī, *Al-Ijābah al-Rabbāniyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Muṣṭafā, 1424/2003), 78.

⁵⁰See al-Kalābādhī for a useful reference to three types of Tajallī stated by Sahl al-Tustarī. Here too a real witnessing of the essence of God in this life is completely denied. Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī, *al-Ta‘arruf li Madhab ahl al-Taṣawwuf*, 121 and Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, 117.

⁵¹See ‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī, *The Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, translated by Reynold A. Nicholson (Brill: Leyden, 1911), 329-333.

The concept of *laṭā’if* in the way explained by Naqshbandīs is peculiar to them.⁵² However, subtleties as a general idea is a common notion among Sufis. Here it might be appropriate to bring in Ibn ‘Arabī.⁵³

4.4.2. Ibn ‘Arabī’s Input

In the context of discussing the meaning of “reaching God,” Ibn ‘Arabī talks about the degrees of those who reach God, and mentions among them “a group who have neither the knowledge of this station nor divine names. But they got to the realities of prophets and their subtleties. Once they get there, a door from the prophets’ subtleties will be opened to them in accordance with the state they have been in at the time of the opening (*fath*). Some of them will have the disclosure of Moses (peace be upon him), such that he will be attached to Moses as long as he is in that stage. Others will have the disclosure of Jesus’ subtleties, and so on and so forth with other messengers as well. He will thus be attached to that messenger and will thus inherit some of his qualities, but through the intermediary of the way of Prophet Muhammad (SAW).”⁵⁴

Ibn ‘Arabī talks about a group of people whom he calls *al-‘Isawiyūn* (those attached to Jesus),⁵⁵ and from what he says we can infer that the Sufi – who is in a stage which is at the foot of a particular prophet – inherits from that prophet what is considered to be that prophet’s characteristics.⁵⁶ From this perspective, Ibn ‘Arabī talks about Abū Yazīd (234/848) and Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 246/861) and their bringing back to life dead beings. As for Abū Yazīd, he accidentally caused an ant to die but then brought her back to life. As for Dhū al-Nūn, an old woman came to him and informed him of her son who had been taken away by a crocodile. Dhū al-Nūn went with her to the Nile and called upon the crocodile who came to her and vomited out her son alive just as Jonah was expelled by the whale. Ibn ‘Arabī ascribes this act to a knowledge granted by Allah to Jesus and realized by Abū Yazīd and Dhū al-Nūn as if having inherited it from Jesus.⁵⁷

⁵²Generally, the levels of heart are recognized by all Sufis. What is peculiar to Naqshbandīs are the specification of the colours and the prophet who is connected to that particular level.

⁵³It must be stated here that Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas about the previous prophets cannot be dealt with even in a single book. Here, I do not wish to present a detailed discussion of his prophetological views. My objective is to briefly hint at some aspects of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought in this regard to the extent that they shed some light on the place of previous prophets in Sufi spirituality.

⁵⁴See *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, 9-volume edition (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2007), 1:305/6.

⁵⁵This does not necessarily refer only to the followers of Jesus meaning thereby Christians. It involves all those in whom the spirit of Jesus is at work.

⁵⁶See chapter 36 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* for a detailed analysis of the nature of spiritual stations and their connections to previous prophets.

⁵⁷See chapter 325 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*.

This goes with the very idea, which Ibn ‘Arabī explains in the *Futūhāt* that miracles in the Muhammadan community are connected to the fellowship of the messengers.⁵⁸ This is indeed a view with serious positive consequences for Muslim understanding of their articles of faith as well as of the whole concept of “miracles of the Saints (*Awliyā’ Allāh*).” We do not see this connection being highlighted in theological sources. It is the Sufi theology that makes this connection and not without some sound justification.⁵⁹ The most interesting feature of this idea is that it introduces the previous prophets alive and just in there in the spiritual world of the Sufis. No form of discontinuity can be imagined. On the contrary, those prophets are functionally alive.

When Ibn ‘Arabī discussed the issue of *muhāsabat al-nafs* (self-examination), which includes purifying ones intention and observing ones breath, he states that this group is at the heart of the Prophet Jonah and goes on to explain the connection. At several instances in the *Futūhāt*, we encounter Ibn ‘Arabī discussing Sufi concepts in relation to many previous prophets, though the shares of Moses, Jesus and Abraham are more visible.⁶⁰

5. Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion that:

1. Islamic faith and practice are not oblivious to the environment and teachings of the previous religions.
2. Islam is a continuation of what other prophets before Prophet Muhammad (SAW) preached and proclaimed.
3. The relation between religions is that of kinship, and they all belong to God and teach a God-centred worldview.
4. Pre-Muhammadan prophets are strongly alive in the spiritual lives of the Muslims and their presence culminates in the manifold Sufi contemplative practices. This reality ought to enhance a strong kinship between the world religions.

My hope is that, this presence of other prophets in Islamic faith and piety would help to introduce a renewed approach to theological discussions among the religions of the world and to establish comparative theology which takes into account the spiritual dimension as an academic discipline in our universities across the globe.

⁵⁸Ibid., 1/274.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰See Ibid., chapters 270 to 382 that discuss aspects of the impact of previous prophets in Sufi practices and different stages and stations of spiritual ascension. We had better remember here the fact that one of the masterpieces of Ibn ‘Arabī, which had a lasting impact on Sufi thought after him, was his famous book on previous Prophets in their connection to Sufi spirituality and cosmology known as *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. There is more than one translation of it in English. The latest is the one produced by Caner K. Dagli under with the title, *The Ringstones of Wisdom* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2011).

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